

# Regional Transportation Planning Organizations Peer Exchange Summary



On June 30, 2017, over 100 rural and small metropolitan transportation professionals and federal and state planning partners participated in the Regional Transportation Planning Organization Peer Exchange. This event was organized in conjunction with the National Regional Transportation Conference, held June 28 – 30, 2017 in Denver, Colorado.

Regional transportation planning organizations (often known as RTPOs or RPOs) conduct planning activities for rural regions without a population center of 50,000 or more, much in the way metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) serve urbanized areas of 50,000 and greater. Their responsibilities vary, but most RTPOs have a contract with a state department of transportation (DOT) for tasks that support statewide planning requirements and provide technical assistance to local governments on transportation issues. Unlike MPOs, RTPOs are not a federally required planning entity. Federal law defines a structure and function for the regions that have sought an RTPO designation, but most are voluntary organizations that work as a planning partner with state DOT funding support, and some have been enabled by state laws on transportation or planning.

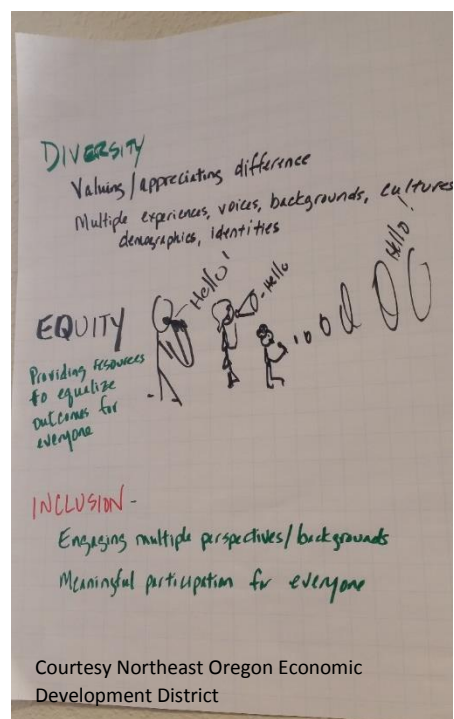
The peer exchange discussion acknowledged the diversity among participating regions and agencies while identifying several themes, including evolving rural planning, preparing for innovation and transformative changes in transportation, and addressing economic resilience. Since attendance in the peer exchange was large, the discussion occurred in four smaller groups, each of which were attended by professionals from across multiple neighboring states. The attendees were grouped into multistate regions, including Eastern, South/Southeastern, Midwestern, and Western states. Each group included a facilitator and a note taker.

## Evolving RTPO Planning: Updating Processes and Taking on New Planning Responsibilities

Many rural transportation planning programs around the country were established following the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which placed greater emphasis on coordinating with the public and local officials in the transportation planning process. Since then, rural planning practice has continued to evolve.

In one specific example discussed by participants, Tennessee established rural planning organizations, known locally as RPOs, in 2005 to assist with identifying local priorities and to provide localities with technical assistance on transportation issues. Tennessee has not had rural regional transportation plans in the past, but one region initiated a planning process in late 2016, and Tennessee DOT hopes to have the remaining 11 plans completed within the next few years. In addition, the state's RPOs are also exploring new ways to assist local governments to address needs and to accommodate institutional changes in state and RPO planning responsibilities. In 2014, the state initiated the Community Transportation Planning Grant program, which assists communities with developing planning documents that coordinate existing and future transportation needs with local land use and growth management policies. This program aims to link statewide transportation planning and investment with local land use decisions to improve the transportation network through plans such as community mobility plans, corridor studies, Complete Streets plans, pedestrian and bicycle master plans, road diet analysis, and transportation systems management and operations studies. One RPO in Tennessee is also exploring assisting communities with pavement management system implementation.

Building and maintaining relationships is a significant part of RTPOs' work. Participants reported that they have used one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders to improve engagement in their RTPO. In one case, meeting with new board and committee members such as elected officials improved attendance at meetings by 150 percent, giving members much of a stake in the decisions and



recommendations made through the committee. In another case, meeting with county roadway supervisors gave RTPOs very specific information about transportation issues that had not previously been mentioned in regional meetings, and led to an increase in roadway supervisor participation in the regional organizations' work.

An important, but difficult, part of relationship building for RTPOs is "shifting the dialogue." This means supporting planning processes and collaboration among stakeholders and agencies in order to build their capacity to speak up in favor of strategies that have been agreed upon and adopted and projects that implement strategies. Stakeholders, community leaders, and officials can do this by saying during the decision-making process: "The community has shown and told us that this is a clear priority of theirs." The responsibility to shift the dialogue has become more important over time, as regions have looked to coordinate various adopted plans and processes to share similar goals and desired outcomes. Also, as funding has become constrained,

RTPOs and other agencies are increasingly looking to prioritize the best possible investments for their communities and regions, and to leverage assets to benefit all stakeholders. Assisting communities with developing comprehensive plans is one way to focus on outcomes and potential transportation and land use solutions.

In several states, the state DOTs provide funding to RTPOs for locally identified planning tasks along with standard deliverables required of all regions. Peer exchange participants emphasized the benefits of this contract arrangement, since regions have the flexibility to do planning that is locally appropriate and desired. This allows them to innovate and explore new types of studies, and to provide the best possible professional support for their local governments. Having such flexibility has led some RTPOs to be able to share information as diverse as real estate data and GIS information with local partners and to conduct local planning studies. In this way, RTPOs can demonstrate their capacity to be a resource for local officials and to one another across the state.

### Recent RTPO and Partner Successes

During the peer exchange, participants identified a range of activities that they considered to be highlights or major accomplishments in their organization or region's work. These efforts address multiple modes of transportation and were frequently done in partnership with other major state, regional, or local partners. These successful efforts included:

- Recreational trail development
- Regional trail branding
- Aligning a region's U.S. Department of Agriculture Stronger Economies Together (SET) plan with a U.S. Economic Development Administration Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS)
- Implementation of community and regional plans through adoption of local resolutions or ordinances
- Implementation of transportation planning activities by communities seeking funds for identified priority projects

## RTPO ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

Several peer exchange participants mentioned the Orton Family Foundation Community Heart & Soul community development model as a source of engagement techniques that can work well in rural places, which was the subject of a workshop during the 2017 National Regional Transportation Conference. The model relies on community input to determine future direction. The process includes developing a network of partners, exploring a community by gathering stories and identifying what matters most to residents, making decisions based on those priorities, and taking action and ownership. More information on Community Heart & Soul is available at [www.orton.org/build-your-community/model](http://www.orton.org/build-your-community/model).

Peer exchange attendees suggested several ideas they had used or were interested in trying in the public engagement process conducted through their regional planning work as a way to hear from people who do not typically participate in traditional public meetings. These include:

- Chalk drawings
- Ice cream socials
- Better Block event, block party, or community festivals
- Post community-driven goals on the wall during council meetings
- Inserts in utility bill mailings
- Outreach through churches, schools, grocery stores, and other community institutions



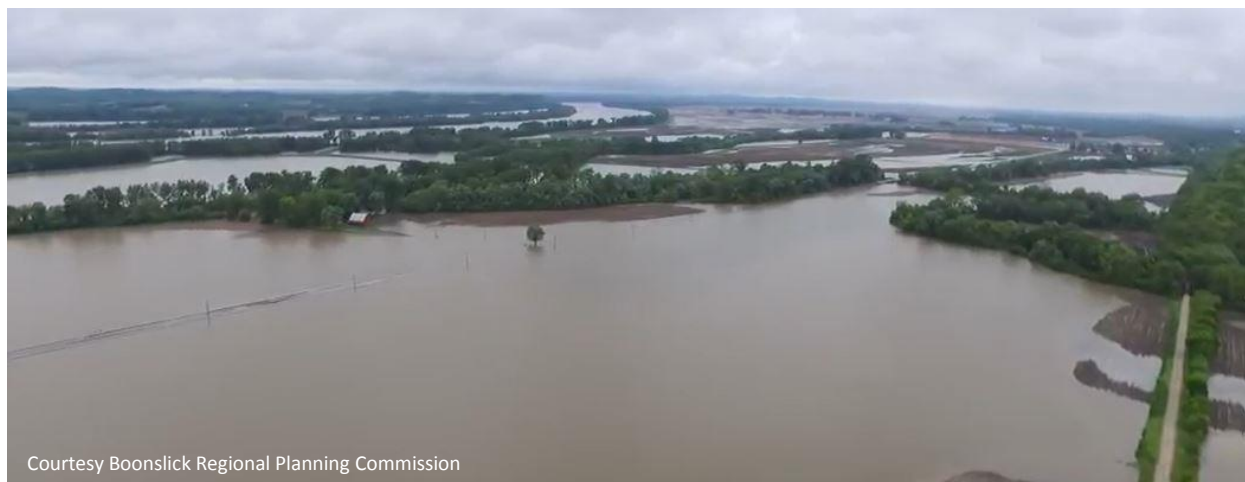
- Mobility study with participation from private transportation providers and a volunteer network who had not previously been engaged in regional planning
- Intentional inclusion of older adults and individuals with disabilities in planning
- Passenger rail service modeling with data analysis and input from community members
- Developing a draft language access plan to identify resources and individuals within the region that can help to improve communication with disabled individuals and immigrants, refugees, and others with limited English proficiency
- Initiating multi-region planning among regions across state lines that share mobility and economic concerns

## Connecting Transportation Planning and Economic Resilience

The peer exchange discussion included consideration of the effects of particular natural disasters such as floods and fires on transportation networks, businesses, and residents, but participants also noted that economic forces can be as challenging, or more so, to a community's sense of resilience. Economic resilience can be defined as the ability of a region to recover quickly from a shock, withstand a shock, or avoid a shock altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Planning with a focus on resilience presents a paradox for some regions and states, which find themselves in a position of balancing available funds for deficient bridges or prioritizing projects for business retention and expansion that might contribute to economic resilience. In Vermont, there have been some successes by using CEDS planning as the vehicle to bring these diverse voices together, identify the range of issues and strategies, and reach those compromises or consensus decisions that help move priority projects forward. One peer exchange participant stressed the importance of completing RTPD plans and deliverables for the benefit of communities and residents: "Why do we do the work of regional transportation planning? To improve quality of life, not to 'build a bridge.'"

One challenge to aligning plans is the expected outcomes of each. Transportation processes result in lists of projects to be considered for future funding, while the CEDS process results in strategies. The plans are not in conflict, but they may differ in content and presentation.



Courtesy Boonslick Regional Planning Commission

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Economic Development Administration (2015). Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Content Guidelines. [www.eda.gov/ceds](http://www.eda.gov/ceds)

Participants discussed ways to better link economic development and transportation plans and processes. According to attendees, one solution is to use one plan, such as the CEDS, to set the goals for the region, and make sure that plan accommodates all types of strategies to advance the goals including transportation. Another solution is to move toward performance-based planning where projects are chosen based on goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes that are aligned among CEDS, transportation, and other plans. Some regions have integrated their transportation and economic development plans, developing one unified plan. Others ensure a high level of interaction among the staff who prepare transportation plans and those who work on the CEDS.

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- PEER EXCHANGE PARTICIPANT

Peer exchange attendees mentioned the WealthWorks rural wealth-building approach as a way to link economic resilience with transportation.<sup>2</sup> This model, presented in a workshop at the 2017 National Regional Transportation Conference, provides a method to identify a range of assets in the community and strategies to promote local ownership and control of assets while improving livelihoods for residents. This development approach focuses on demand for products or services. Although primarily an economic resilience approach, it can be used to identify how transportation supports economic resilience for businesses and residents, as well as how to advance transportation goals by analyzing demand and strategic partners.

Some peer exchange participants reported that their regions are focusing their economic resilience efforts in specific ways, such as access to global markets for some products or regionalizing a food system within a state or multi-state region, rather than almost all food and feed being produced primarily for export to other states or other countries. Attendees were concerned that over time, economies that are strong in agriculture will see big transitions, as farmers' average age has increased with each successive U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture. Those businesses may not have continuity plans for dealing with disasters or sustainability plans to pass on to another generation



Courtesy Region XII Council of Governments

<sup>2</sup> Summary information and resources on using the economic development model is available at [www.WealthWorks.org](http://www.WealthWorks.org).



of farmers, which might change the regional economic system in ways that also affect transportation demand.

Another transportation and economic development challenge is that visitors to high amenity areas can overwhelm rural places, requiring coordination among transportation agencies, parks, and other agencies managing the destinations in order to adequately address the issues that arise. Some options for

managing visitor impacts include recapitalizing the existing park transportation fleets, using reservations and timed entry, and exploring airport-to-park transportation, which could be provided by a private sector partner. These strategies can result in preserving the natural resources within the protected lands, while also providing positive visitor experiences. Participants noted that the Federal Lands Access Program can be a source of funding to help manage transportation concerns in areas around federal lands. Tourism that may result from improving access to federal lands and other amenities can increase jobs, but they are often seasonal and do not meet living wage standards, making them less of a priority for state development plans. However, some regions' tourism is increasing anyway, requiring that attention is paid to transportation, workforce development, and housing, especially as workers are priced out of the housing market where they work and have to travel long distances.

Some regions are experiencing a mismatch between where housing is that they can afford and where their jobs are, even outside of tourism-driven economies. Participants reported that finding solutions requires attention to transportation, housing, jobs, and other factors to make a region and its population more resilient. Resilience is also a major concern for regions that have experienced or are expecting a closure of a major employer. New jobs for displaced employees will be affected by their mobility, as well as their skills, available jobs, and development efforts.

## Funding and Partnerships

Peer exchange attendees shared both concern and opportunities for future funding scenarios, both at the national level as well as in state or local contexts.

State departments of health and community and economic development agencies in some places provide grants to counties, municipalities, or regions to improve their built infrastructure. This could include bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, improved crossings to schools and other destinations, and downtown enhancement and other projects that may include sidewalks. Local chambers of commerce may be advocates for transportation improvements that benefit their local business members, including active transportation and other improvements to mobility and access. These kinds of local and state-

level partners could assist with funding for both planning and implementation of infrastructure efforts that also advance the partners' other goals.

Some larger businesses might have a giving program and take pride in investing in their communities, or there might be alignment between community development goals and community philanthropies. In

rural areas, engaging potential private partners for funding can be risky, however; with lower populations, the same few companies might be tapped multiple times for a variety of community initiatives, and might not realistically be able to partner on a shared priority. Engaging the private sector as a funder or project partner entails the public sector being able to tell the story, and to understand and articulate why the private sector would want to be involved. Company volunteer programs might be a way to get engagement, and recruiting company representatives to serve on planning committees might be a way to determine if a company's philosophy aligns with the priorities of the community in a way that leads to a partnership.

Where there is demand, private sector partners may be available to provide mobility services. This can include local or long-distance trips for a variety of reasons, such as for medical trips if public or private funding is available, or for trips to access destinations such as federal lands.



Courtesy Imperial Calcasieu Regional Planning and Development Commission

## Transformative Innovation in Rural and Small Metro Mobility

Peer exchange attendees commented on the kinds of transformations occurring in industry, in particular with the evolution of mobility as a service and the technologies surrounding connected and autonomous vehicles.

During the 2017 National Regional Transportation Conference, Valerie Lefler, CEO of Liberty Mobility Now provided a presentation about the company's approach to providing mobility as a service in rural areas and successes to date. Several peer exchange participants took inspiration from learning about Liberty Mobility Now to brainstorm on the need to better address mobility with new models. Attendees

HOW DO WE MAKE TRANSIT MORE FLEXIBLE,  
AND HOW DO WE MAKE MOBILITY GENERALLY  
EASIER IN OUR COMMUNITIES?

discussed augmenting existing transit services, improving paratransit, addressing cost effectiveness in providing rides to rural residents, aggregating rural trips to urban destinations such as hospitals, and how the availability of data can transform transit.

Participants identified many benefits and interest areas of emerging connected and autonomous vehicles. Peer exchange attendees anticipate that connected vehicle technology will offer significant



opportunities to improve safety outcomes on the national level, including in rural areas. Mobility improvements offered by driver assistance technologies or autonomous vehicles might be particularly beneficial to mobility impaired individuals in rural places where transit is not available or cannot meet all of the needs. Changes in land use patterns are mostly discussed in urban settings, but attendees note that emerging technologies might affect development form in town centers and in areas that are growing.



But most participants also expressed concerns over connected and autonomous vehicles, including:

- Responsibility for designing and maintaining infrastructure
- Safety, including whether technologies will perform appropriately in rural transportation settings
- Security and reliability of software
- Integration of transportation and telecommunications infrastructure
- Mixed technologies and capabilities of vehicles on the road
- Variation in connected infrastructure implementation
- Ownership of data
- Employment in commercial driver occupations
- Changes in local economies as a result of transportation innovation

Telecommunications infrastructure and access was discussed alongside transportation, as a significant factor in moving people and accessing services. One participant remarked, “Broadband is the new railroad” about the impact that being connected, or not, has on communities. Some broadband expansion practices shared during the peer exchange include:

- Having school nurses classified as public health providers to be eligible to get fiber to schools
- Laying fiber or other improvements in the right of way along transportation facilities
- Analyzing the impact of using state DOT facilities and other public facilities to install wireless capabilities

For example, the Northern Oklahoma Development Authority (NODA) has created an internet company that has installed wireless access points on top of grain elevators. The company, known as NODAnet, provides businesses and residents with affordable high-speed internet with no data limits. The wireless internet service provider model was acknowledged as a cost-effective way to expand the availability of high-speed internet in rural areas.



## Hopes for the Future

Peer exchange participants recognize that transformations happening in planning practice and in the provision of transportation infrastructure and service will shape future transportation demand, options, and technologies. During discussion of these trends, attendees identified trends where they see a particular opportunity or great promise for transportation to be improved in their regions. These anticipated benefits are summarized below.

RTPO and small MPO professionals attending the peer exchange anticipate benefits from transitioning, over time, to performance management. Participants hope to be able to use data to communicate better with stakeholders and the public what their choices are and what the impacts would be.

Continued expansion of rural bicycle and pedestrian networks, including connecting communities, is a desire of several participants who expressed a need to improve mobility and health outcomes in their regions.

One theme among peer exchange participants from multiple regions around the United States was using new and emerging technologies to improve the condition of transportation assets. Transportation professionals from different places described the effects of harsh winters, recent fires that melted asphalt, and bridges threatened by extreme flooding, all of which cause significant degradation to the condition of roads and bridges. These professionals expressed that they look forward to future pavement and bridge technologies that can better withstand both extreme and routine events that threaten the condition of the infrastructure. Professionals from other regions anticipate improved asset management with the evolution of available data, software, and drones that might improve monitoring and decision making.



Using different engagement techniques, participants hope to improve inclusivity in planning efforts in the future. Expanding availability of broadband might help to engage more rural residents and leaders with opportunities for input in statewide planning efforts, although that alone will likely not ensure adequate inclusion of people with limited incomes, disabilities, limited English proficiency, or others whose mobility needs might not have been heard in the past.

Peer exchange participants hope for better safety outcomes in the future, particularly in rural areas, with an emphasis on education on safe driving behavior and safety culture, as well as on designing safe systems.

Participants look forward to implementation of existing technologies, as well as emerging and future technologies to improve transit routes, times, headways, and the ability to communicate better within an agency and with the public. Deploying broadband along transit corridors will benefit transportation and also general community connectivity.

Peer exchange participants are looking for supportive policies to meet mobility needs. This takes many forms, including local Complete Streets policies where the communities have identified bicycle and pedestrian needs. Using planning and building codes to improve resilience could be an outcome of state and local policies. Future funding for transit, for intelligent transportation systems (ITS), and for general multimodal transportation priorities was a concern expressed by individuals from several regions.

## Conclusions

The peer exchange discussions addressed several themes. RTPs and their partner organizations are increasingly looking for ways to evolve in order to provide planning and assistance to the communities they serve. In each of the small group discussions where the peer exchange took place, attendees emphasized their current efforts—or plans for the future—to gather more feedback in the planning process. This includes outreach to people who have not previously engaged in planning efforts in order to meet locally identified needs and support a resilient regional economy. Transportation professionals anticipate that the fields of planning and mobility will continue to change over time with technological advancement and policy updates. These changes are likely to bring both opportunities and challenges that will require new strategies, but they also may offer the potential for improved accessibility, safety, and tools for making informed decisions regarding managing transportation assets and resources.



## Peer Exchange Participants

During the peer exchange, over 100 participants gathered in small groups organized by multi-state regions. Each group was led by a peer facilitator, with the assistance of a note taker whose notes contributed to the development of this summary report. These individuals included:

- Eric Ghahate, North Central New Mexico Economic Development District (Santa Fe, NM)
- Elizabeth Jernigan, Piedmont Triad Regional Commission (Kernersville, NC)
- Carrie Kissel, NADO Research Foundation (Washington, DC)
- Gena McCullough, Bi-State Regional Commission (Rock Island, IL)
- Brett Schwartz, NADO Research Foundation (Washington, DC)
- Elijah Sharp, New River Valley Regional Commission (Radford, VA)
- Josh Shumaker, NADO (Washington, DC)
- Chris Zeilinger, Community Transportation Association of America (Washington, DC)

Peer exchange participants' comments and discussion themes were drawn from their own experiences as well as information they found helpful from workshops and sessions that occurred previously at the 2017 National Regional Transportation Conference. For more information about the conference, including speaker presentation materials, visit [www.nado.org/events/rpo2017](http://www.nado.org/events/rpo2017).

## About the NADO Research Foundation

Founded in 1988, the NADO Research Foundation is the nonprofit research affiliate of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO). The NADO Research Foundation identifies, studies, and promotes regional solutions and approaches to improving local prosperity and services through the nationwide network of regional development organizations. The Research Foundation shares best practices, offers professional development training, analyzes the impact of federal policies and programs on regional development organizations, and examines the latest developments and trends in small metropolitan and rural America. Most importantly, the Research Foundation is helping bridge the communications gap among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Learn more at [www.NADO.org](http://www.NADO.org) and [www.RuralTransportation.org](http://www.RuralTransportation.org).

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